Network on Transitions to Adulthood
Policy Brief
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University of Pennsylvania • Department of Sociology
3718 Locust Walk • Philadelphia, PA 19104-6299

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Challenges in the Transition to Adulthood for Youth in Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, and Special Education

E. Michael Foster and Elizabeth J. Gifford

Youth face many changes and challenges as they move into adulthood, and for those who have been involved in various social welfare systems, these changes can be even more profound. Roughly 20,000 youth in a given year age out of foster care and are on their own, often with limited family ties. Nearly 38,000 youth aged 17–20 were in residential placement for juvenile offenses in 1997, and a large proportion of those face a release plan with diminishing amounts of supervision after a stretch of highly structured living. Approximately 375,000 students left special education in the 2000–2001 school year, often without a high school degree, to face adult challenges without a familiar support system. To compound the difficulties, the youth often have learning disabilities, limited life skills, and health, emotional, and behavioral problems that can exacerbate an already challenging transition.

E. Michael Foster and Elizabeth J. Gifford, in their chapter in On the Frontier of Adulthood, examine how youth in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and special education fare over time given the special challenges they face, paying particular attention to the effectiveness of programs designed to support these youth during their transition.

The Path from Services to Independence

Family resources, both financial and emotional, smooth the transition to adulthood for youth. Teens in foster care, juvenile justice, and special education, however, often come from families whose economic resources are limited, and in some cases, whose family relationships have degraded. As noted above, they are also challenged by a variety of physical and mental health issues. As a result, many of these youth continue to fare poorly as they enter adulthood. More than one-half of youth leaving the juvenile justice system and between 37% and 46% of youth leaving foster care had not finished high school. Rates of joblessness were high for youth exiting foster care (14–51%), juvenile justice (31%), and special education (19–36%). Approximately one-third of the youth leaving foster care were receiving cash assistance two years after leaving.[1]

Support Services and Programs for Special Populations

Services and special programs have been developed to better aid these populations during this transition. Youth leaving foster care, for example, can enter an Independent Living Program until age 21. The federally funded program provides educational opportunities, counseling, support services, training in daily living skills, outreach, and a range of other services, such as family planning and parenting classes.

[1] A. Dworsky and Mark Courtney, *Self-sufficiency of Former Foster Youth in Wisconsin: Analysis of Unemployment Insurance Wage Data and Public Assistance Data*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001. Robert Goerge et al., *Employment Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2002. R. Cook, *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth: Final Report.* Vols.1 & 2. Rockville, MD: Westat, Inc., 1991.

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Youth leaving residential placement within the juvenile justice system can access a range of parole-based or noncustodial aftercare programs. Services can include job training, counseling, or tutoring and typically reflect goals that communities identify as important (such as reductions in recidivism or substance use). Some programs target youth most likely to be incarcerated again, with tailored services and supervision designed to meet individual needs. Youth who received special education services in school begin receiving some form of transition services at age 14, ranging from helping the student set a course of study (e.g., vocational training) that will aid them as they enter the workforce, to training in daily living skills, employment preparation, and community living. Services can be on-site or at locations away from the school.

The effectiveness of many of these services is yet undetermined. Little research has been done, and those studies that have been undertaken often suffer major limitations. The most reliable evaluations have been conducted on services provided to youth in the juvenile justice system, and for the most part, they show few if any benefits. (It should be noted that the lack of any significant benefits may stem from small sample sizes and attrition.) The handful of fairly rigorous studies on foster care and special education services, in contrast, tend to show improvements in employment and education.[2] Again, however, most of the research remains limited by a number of methodological issues.

Several factors contribute to the dearth of understanding of these programs. Existing data sources, for example, are often inadequate for examining special populations. Large surveys often omit institutionalized populations, and when data are collected, they may be limited by the tendency to underreport involvement with the police or other events that carry stigma. Unfortunately, developing new data sources is particularly difficult and expensive for these special populations. Even with adequate funding, assembling a research team necessarily composed of service providers, policymakers, and researchers can be difficult.

Policy Implications

Youth leaving child welfare services are an especially vulnerable group of young adults. Although programs and services are available to aid them in their quest for independence, there is considerable room for improvement. Many of the services offered are unnecessarily inflexible because they are still largely defined by age, rather than by an individual's need for services. Further, none of the programs equip families to support youth during this period. As other chapters in *On the Frontier of Adulthood* make clear, families are a key support to their children, and the assumption that youth live "independently" in early adulthood is outdated. Finally, many of these youth are simultaneously involved in more than one system, yet the services that support them are rarely interconnected. A fragmented view of delinquency, education, and family circumstances is likely to offer an incomplete view of the youth's needs as he or she enters adulthood.

The costs of these services are substantial, but are they well spent? More research is needed to sufficiently answer that question. One thing is certain, however. Regardless of their effectiveness, the cost of doing nothing is even greater. When a child with emotional, physical, learning, or behavioral problems is adrift, the cost to society in homelessness, crime, joblessness, and other outcomes is substantial and enduring. Programs have the potential to be cost-effective, especially if they reflect a realistic vision of the life course, involve families appropriately, and target those persons most in need and most likely to benefit from the services.

Based on Michael Foster and Elizabeth Gifford, "The Transition to Adulthood for Youth Leaving Public Systems: Challenges to Policies and Research," in On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy, edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming, 2004. E. Michael Foster is associate professor in the Department of Health Policy and Administration, Pennsylvania State University.

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[2] R. Cook, *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth: Phase 1 Final Report* (1990), and *Phase 2 Final Report* (1991). Volumes 1 and 2. Rockville, MD: Westat, Inc. M. Wagner and J. Blackorby, "Transition from High School to Work or College: How Special Education Students Fare," *The Future of Children*, 6(1)(1996): 103–120.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.